



Behind the Stream  
(web short)

0561

DOWNRIVER

R. J DYSON



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Content by R. J Dyson. Layout and design by Absolutely Unprofessional.

First Publishing: 2022  
ISBN 978-0-9997832-8-3  
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## 0561 Downriver

**"T**he water wasn't ice cold, but it wasn't bath-worthy either. The fall rains had swept in from the west and, though frigid, managed to keep the river temperature above sixty-five degrees. A person could survive for more than an hour if they could shake the shock of swimming in it. Not to mention the terror of racing downstream in the dark through an unfamiliar forest. And the added horror of having fallen from a steep hillside beside a raging waterfall into a swirling pool of boulder-filled liquid below.

Maria was barely conscious. She had smacked the water flat on her back with Charlie directly on top of her. His weight knocked the wind out of her, breaking several of

her ribs on impact. Pushed deep below the pounding falls, she clawed like an animal trying to escape before being caught up in a dark rush of water.

After racing through a narrow channel between two enormous upright boulders on either side of the river, Maria finally reached the churning surface, startled by the bitter cold rain. Floating on her back, she gasped for air. Her side ached with each breath. Her lungs felt bruised—the sort of dizzying pain she once felt during her monitor initiation ceremonial beating years before. A hazing tradition started by Chicanery in his youth to keep recruits in their place.

*What did I do?* she thought, confused by her surroundings and drifting in and out of consciousness. *I'm not dead...At least...I don't think I am. I don't remember a session on the afterlife. I guess this could be death. I never really thought about death before.* Crashing into the broad side of a stone at the center of the river, she whacked her chin, jolting her teeth and biting her lip.

“OUCH!” she cried, groaning between breaths. It was another five minutes of floating and gasping and tasting the blood of her wound before she grabbed control of her mind again. *I'm definitely not dead. Whatever death is...I don't think it'll involve this sort of aching...bleeding...coldness.*

Like the sudden rush over the falls, the recent events of the fall Sojourn crashed into her mind with a nauseating burst of memories. “I was on the edge! I was pulling back on Charlie! So close to finding out what was on that tablet...

what I needed to...to finally escape.” Maria mumbled to herself, floating listlessly downriver. Her muscles were stiff from the frigid water, and an icy headache began to settle in like when she would eat crushed ice a little too fast on a hot summer day as a Seeker.

“I yanked them from the rocks...I didn’t want to hurt anyone. Why didn’t you just give in, Charlie? Why didn’t you do what I asked?” she angrily shouted into the heavy rain, making it impossible to open her eyes. Not that it mattered. It was dark, and the water was choppy, constantly splashing over her face.

“Charlie?” she groaned, realizing she shouldn’t be alone. “Charlie! Are you out there?” Her voice was muffled by the rain, the river, and the tight muscles in her throat despite forcing her lips to work out the syllables. Maria winced in pain with every attempt to shout for Charlie until her voice simply refused to make a sound.

The only reply came from the river—the sound of waves, and rapids, and swirling eddies.

*I’m alone*, she resolved, wide-eyed and staring into the dark sky as the rain turned to drizzle before clearing up entirely. “I’m alone, and I’m responsible for the death of a student.” Maria had never felt remorse. She had never intentionally harmed another human. Though she had secretly gathered information without The Chamber’s knowledge, her deceit hadn’t affected anyone else. Until now.

The weight of Charlie's disappearance only exaggerated the pain of broken ribs and the fear of being lost downriver from the only home she could recall. Tired and soaked, her body slowly sank below the river's surface. First her feet and then her waist, until only the flat part of her face could be seen. *This is it. This is how a human dies. It's more than physical pain, isn't it? I don't know what hope is supposed to feel like. The Anti-Libertas don't allow us to consider the concept...but I think I know what it's like to lose it.*

The stars shimmered against the black backdrop. Pegasus appeared strong and noble. Seeing it so clearly made her smile. She remembered early sessions as a Seeker finding comfort in navigating with the stars, wondering just how big the world beyond Compound 40 actually was.

*I don't remember seeing that flashing star. I don't remember it being so big either.* Maria's eyes intermittently opened in short bursts, long enough to notice that, while Pegasus stayed relatively still in the night sky, one star in particular seemed to move more and more out of pace with the constellation.

Maria opened her eyes again after an extended stretch of rest as her body tried to save energy and push off hypothermia. She choked on the water washing over her face at the sight of the strange light. Moments ago, it seemed to be up among the stars yet was now just above the treeline, shining a powerful spotlight on her. The light paused, blinding her momentarily, then proceeded to scour

the river surface around her, pausing again not far upriver. *What on the edge is it? It doesn't move like a C-40 drone. It's too fast...too nimble. Deplorables don't have this sort of tech, do they? They can't! The Chamber assures us of technological dominance under their leadership. I can't hide. I can't swim away. I can't even think straight. I'm... I'm...*

Maria passed out as a two-person inflatable raft with a trolling motor on the back pulled up alongside her body. The light above continued to shine down on her location, highlighting her face in the dark water. Two individuals quickly pulled her from the river, recognized her gray uniform, checked her pulse, then wrapped her in a thermal blanket.

The spotlight shifted back upriver to the second location it had paused moments before. The raft followed the light, zig-zagged across the area, and then, finding nothing, headed back downriver.

“Are you gonna hurt me?” said Maria, fear jolting her awake. “You aren't Deplorables, are you? Wild and divisive and working to destroy everything good Chicanery built. What was that spotlight above me? You aren't Deplorables, are you?”

*Shhh*, whispered a gentle voice, not physically audible, but a sort of internal voicing clearly meant to comfort Maria. Though she didn't witness either of the raft's occupant's mouths' move, she felt relieved nonetheless,

closed her eyes, and quickly sank into a deep sleep.

“This is the first student we’ve found out here in years,” said the pilot with a rough but tender voice.

“She looks too old to be a student, but that uniform and those belts say otherwise,” said the other passenger. “Could easily be an accident. Maybe another sacrifice for Chicanery’s cause. Maybe it’s finally collapsing, like the rest of ‘em.”

“We’ll know when she wakes,” the pilot replied, squeezing the throttle and skipping across the rough waters in the dark, the way a person familiar with the scenery can do.

“And what about the other one? The drone detected them...seems they didn’t make it.”

“Seems like it.”